

July 12, Ordinary 15A (Genesis 25:19–34)

This guy Jacob is diabolical.

by [Kathryn Z. Johnston](#) in the [July 2026](#) issue

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My family has a piece of art created by my great-great-grandfather. If you look at it from a distance, it appears to be just a cross with a fancy frame around it. But when you get closer, you realize that the cross and frame are made by layers and layers of carefully cut paper. It was meticulously handcrafted by an incredibly gifted (and patient) family member.

I wanted it. I also felt like, as the pastor in the family, I *should* have it.

So I came up with a plan.

I suggested to my sister that since we probably each had things we wanted from our family home, we should name them, each taking a turn. Oh, and I, being the older one, should go first.

It's important to note here that both of our parents were still alive at the time and that they were not in any way, shape, or form giving away their things. Nevertheless, my sister agreed, and I chose the paper cross.

Then she chose the family piano.

Oh. I hadn't thought about that. That would have been fun to have, and it would have saved some money down the road. Oh well. My turn again—but I hadn't thought of what I would choose next. I couldn't tell you what I picked, but then it was my sister's turn and she made another really good choice.

My big idea had failed. I didn't trade away my birthright, but my greed did. And again, I'm the one who's a pastor.

Reading the story of Esau and Jacob, my first reaction is always to shake my head. This guy Jacob is diabolical. He's manipulative and sneaky. He exploits his brother's hunger and takes advantage of his aging father. It appears the writers of Genesis are going out of their way to lift up a very flawed human being as an unlikely hero.

But maybe Jacob is not a hero, just a human. Throughout scripture, God is calling the ones whom the world wouldn't pick. God's choice seems to be less about perfection and more about someone's willingness to serve. God's redemption purpose is accomplished by working through broken, very human individuals—not around them.

And what was my issue? Did I really think there was not enough to go around? As anyone who has been faced with the task of cleaning out a childhood home knows, there is usually *plenty* to go around. Why was I being so greedy? Why was what I had not enough?

Scripture likes to play up the one who doesn't have enough or doesn't seem to be enough, contrasted with the one who has plenty or has been "blessed," as the Old Testament often describes it. This passage begins by telling us about the descendants of Abraham, beginning with his son Isaac, who marries Rebekah—but Rebekah is

barren. It doesn't seem like she is going to be enough.

Isaac prays, and the Lord grants his prayer: Rebekah is pregnant with twins! But they are already arguing in the womb, and we are told that the one who is traditionally lesser, the younger, will be served by the older.

Jacob doesn't miss a trick; even coming out of the womb he is grabbing at the ankle of his brother. The description of the two boys continues to show how Jacob is the lesser, quiet and hanging out with his mother, as opposed to Esau hunting and gathering and hanging out with his father.

But Jacob isn't happy with what he has.

My brother-in-law had a beautiful home on Martha's Vineyard. One of the happiest (nonfamily-related) days of his life was the day he bought a small fishing boat. It was big enough to take his kids out on the water and play around in the bays and harbors. The afternoon he purchased it, a few of us met him down at the water's edge to ride with him in the boat to the other side of the island, where we were meeting the rest of the family for dinner. He was beaming with joy.

But as we put-putted along, we kept passing bigger and bigger boats that were moored in the harbor. I saw him start to look at those other boats, and I could tell he was comparing them to the one that only minutes before he had been so proud was his.

What is it about humankind that we just cannot help but to compare and then scheme? It's fruitless. There will always be a better boat. Or, if you're Jacob, there will always be a better birthright.

I guess the good news for my brother-in-law, for me, and for Jacob is that despite our significant shortcomings, God can use us anyway. We don't have to be a perfect human to be a faithful servant.